An Introduction to Historical Detective Fiction

I’ll begin by introducing the historical detective fiction I’ve written, then I’ll discuss some of the challenges of writing historical detective fiction. Finally, we’ll get down to the fun stuff: some of my own favourite examples from this subgenre of crime fiction.

First, an introduction to the crime fiction I’ve written. I am the author of two crime fiction books – a novel called *The Englishman’s Cameo*, and its sequel, a collection of short stories named *The Eighth Guest & Other Muzaffar Jang Mysteries*. The detective of this series is a man named Muzaffar Jang. Muzaffar Jang is the archetypal ‘hero’ – he’s urbane, well-read, and of course he has a very sharp mind, which helps him solve all the mysteries he’s faced with.

And he lives in 17th century Delhi. This is the Delhi that the Mughal emperor Shahjahan founded after moving out from Agra. It’s a city in ferment in 1656, which is when my detective Muzaffar first investigates a case. The emperor and his empire are in a bad way; there is rebellion brewing among his sons, and his place on the throne is being threatened.

When *The Englishman’s Cameo* was published – in October 2009 – a lot of reviews appeared in various publications, and there were interviews. One comment that lots of reviewers made was on the ‘uniqueness’ of the setting. Nearly all the people who interviewed me asked me why I used 17th century Delhi as a setting, rather than say, modern-day Delhi. They could understand why I’d choose Delhi; I live here, I’ve lived here for most of my life. This is the city I’m familiar with. Why would I want to set my stories in an era so alien to what Delhi is today?

*The Eighth Guest & Other Muzaffar Jang Mysteries* was released in August 2011. Again, the questions started. Again, the same comments began surfacing: what a unique idea – to set a detective story against a historical background.

So, as I’ve been trying to explain to people: no, this isn’t a unique idea at all. In fact, historical detective fiction is a very substantial subgenre in itself. Few people in India seem to be acquainted with it, or even think about this as a distinct subgenre. Even in bookstores, at least in Delhi, about the only historical detective novels I’ve come across are those of C J Sansom.

But dozens of authors have been writing historical detective fiction for a long time now. So much so that the Crime Writers’ Association has a separate award – known as the CWA Ellis Peters Award – for historical detective fiction.
This abundance of fascinating historical detective fiction was the main reason I decided to create a Mughal detective. The thought had struck me that India has a vast and very interesting historical background. It would make a perfect setting for a detective – so why not? That was how Muzaffar Jang came about. And since Shahjahan’s time is a very interesting period in Indian history – besides having the plus point of a fairly large amount of readily available research material – it was the period I chose to set my detective in.

That point about research material being available brings me to the second part of my talk: the challenges of writing historical detective fiction. Writing readable, intelligently plotted detective fiction in itself is a challenge. Putting all of that against a backdrop that’s often vastly different from the one in which you’re living can be even more difficult.

1. Firstly, there’s the problem of creating an authentic setting for the story. The premise of historical fiction – whether or not it’s detective fiction – is that it’s set in a definite historical place and time. You owe it to your readers to create a setting that is a good recreation of what life would have been like back then, whenever your story is set. And for that, the most important thing is to do research. Loads and loads of research. I have ended up researching spending hours trying to find out how a typical Mughal nobleman’s haveli was laid out in in the 17th century, for instance. How people lived, what they wore, what they ate, what wealth meant, what were their religious beliefs, how they treated their wives and children – there’s no end to the detail that you need to build into a historical novel.

Here, for instance, is an example from one of my own stories. This is a short story called One Night in Winter; it appears in The Eighth Guest & Other Muzaffar Jang Mysteries. This is a description of a sarai, or a travellers’ inn in 17th century Delhi:

“The gatehouse opened into a large square courtyard, hemmed in on all four sides by double-storeyed rows of chambers. The side opposite the gatehouse was pierced by another, smaller gateway, beyond which Muzaffar could just about see a small, scrubby field, bounded by the high wall that surrounded the sarai. On either side of the gate, the ground floor was occupied by the warehouses that were rented out to resident merchants. The other rooms, from the bales of cloth, bundles of grass and faggots of firewood that he could see piled in the verandas, seemed to have been given over to the permanent residents of the sarai: the tailors, the barbers, the physicians, the sellers of wood and fodder. Some of the rooms, thought Muzaffar, were probably occupied by dancing girls and musicians, a fixture in the larger sarais.

Muzaffar followed the soldier across the quadrangle, past the inevitable mosque and well.”

Of course, since a writer of fiction is a writer of fiction rather than of fact, he or she would probably be entitled to take some liberties. On the other hand, there are certain ‘liberties’ that are not liberties so as much as obvious mistakes that an observant reader can spot, and
which can be embarrassing. For example, I was reading a historical novel the other day, a novel set in ancient India. In a description of a palace, the author mentioned orchards of custard apple trees – and my immediate reaction was to wince, because the custard apple was introduced in India only after Columbus’s landmark voyage to the Americas. Ancient India didn’t have custard apples.

So, challenge 1: The need to do lots of research. And to ensure that everything you put into your book by way of setting is historically plausible.

2. Second, research on the historical aspects of juridical and legal administration. This is related, of course, to historical research in general, but it’s in particular applicable to historical detective novels. A lot of what we take for granted as law today – what we equate with justice – need not necessarily be true of the time and the place we, as writers of historical detective fiction, are writing about. Here’s an example. Although most democratic countries today are cautious when it comes to capital punishment or long and rigorous prison sentences, things were different in earlier times. For instance, in 18th century England, hangings and transportation were common for even outrageously petty crimes. I remember reading about a teenager who was transported to Australia for having stolen a few cucumbers!

When I began doing research into Mughal India for the Muzaffar Jang stories, I imagined that the ‘bloodthirsty Mughal’, as common lore seems to project the dynasty, would have enforced particularly heavy penalties, left, right and centre. After all, it is a known fact that one form of especially gruesome execution that the Mughals practised was to have the condemned crushed under the foot of an elephant.

It therefore came as a surprise to me to discover that that was far from the truth. Yes, the Mughal rulers did think up some very violent and ruthless forms of punishment, but these were more often than not practised only on those guilty of treason. For the more common crimes – the thefts, the murders, the kidnappings and rapes – the penalty enforced was usually a monetary one. Fines were to be paid, in keeping with the severity of the crime.

Another related angle is the one of juridical administration. Who enforced laws? How did they do it? Was there a police force in place? How did it function? What was its hierarchical structure? How was justice dispensed?

Here is an example of how a court functioned in ancient Rome. I won’t go into the very detailed description of how cases were fought and advocates appointed and so on, but you can get a basic idea of what it was like to be present at a murder trial in the days of Julius Caesar. This excerpt is from Steven Saylor’s book, A Murder on the Appian Way. It’s been written in the first person, from the point of view of the detective, Gordianus the Finder.
“Presiding over the court from a raised tribunal was the former consul Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus, a grim-jawed, humourless former consul hand-picked by Pompey himself and, purely as a formality, approved by a vote of the people’s assembly. Testimony was given before a panel of 360 potential jurors who sat on raised bleachers on either side of the courtyard. This panel had been selected from a list of eligible senators and men of property drawn up by Pompey. Of these, eighty-one would ultimately be chosen by lot to make up the jury.

Milo and his advocates, Cicero and Marcus Claudius Marcellus sat with their secretaries on benches facing the tribunal, as did the prosecutors, Clodius’s nephew Appius Claudius, Publius Valerius Nepos, and Marc Antony. Also present were numerous officers of the court, including a battery of secretaries to record the testimony in Tironian shorthand.

A huge crowd gathered at the open end of the courtyard to view the proceedings. Those with foresight sent slaves ahead to save places for them.”

So, basically, we’re back to the question of research. Research is all-important.

3. We now come to another problem that is peculiar to the writing of historical detective fiction: the forensics of it. If you’re writing a contemporary detective story, life becomes much easier for your detective simply because we are living in the 21st century, and science and technology have made things possible that wouldn’t even have been dreamt of perhaps a couple of hundred years ago. And I’m not talking just of complex stuff like DNA testing, which didn’t exist in India till some years back. Let’s take the example of something that’s really common: fingerprinting. Sir William James Herschel has first introduced the system of identifying criminals by their fingerprints in the 1860s, but it was not till about 1892 that Francis Galton devised a scientific method of classifying fingerprints, making them a more effective forensic tool.

In India, the Fingerprint Bureau was established in Calcutta only in 1897, so actually something crime writers take so much for granted hasn’t been around for much more than a century.

So where did the clues come from before then? If you’re setting a detective story in the medieval world, your detective basically has to operate in a world without photography, phone tapping, fingerprinting, blood tests, and much else that is very common in forensics today. Basically, then, you’re faced with the task of making sure your story has enough clues that are discernible by the five senses, and which can be interpreted by a sufficiently cerebral detective.
Here’s an example, of medieval forensic science in practice. This is from Robert van Gulik’s book, *The Emperor’s Pearl*. The detective is Judge Dee, who was based on an 8th century Chinese magistrate. More about Judge Dee later; for now, the excerpt.

“As the coroner righted himself, the judge asked him:
‘What made you think the man was poisoned? You have heard that Dr Pien believes that he died from a heart-attack.’
‘In addition to the symptoms of heart failure, Your Honour, there are small purplish spots on the tips of the fingers and toes, and I verified just now that the tongue is swollen and covered by dark stains. I happen to be from the south, and I know that the mountain people there concoct a slow-working poison that produces exactly those symptoms. As soon as I had seen the spots on his finger-tips, I knew that he must have been killed by that particular poison.’

Dr Pien bent over the corpse. The coroner opened the mouth wide with the silver stave and let the doctor look inside. Dr Pien nodded. He said contritely to the judge:
‘Your coroner is quite right, sir. I was wrong. I now remember having read about that poison. If taken on an empty stomach, it will become effective after a quarter of an hour or so. But if taken after a heavy meal, it may take an hour or more.’

4. One last challenge, and this can be a difficult one. The challenge of balancing detail with crime. When you’re writing a detective story in a contemporary setting, you – and your readers – are more or less familiar with the setting. You don’t have to explain the nitty-gritty of life. Your readers know what a car is, or how books are kept at home, or what bacon, or tandoori chicken, is. As I’ve already mentioned, when you’re writing historical detective fiction, sometimes you need to explain the smallest of things.

But at what point does detail become too much detail? When does the historical backdrop overwhelm the crime story? I’ve come across so-called historical detective stories which I thought were not really detective stories: just an excuse to write about a particular era, without paying much attention to the solving of the crime.

Conversely, what is too little historical detail to actually make a detective story a historical detective story? How much must you provide in the way of background detail without swamping the story of the crime and its investigation?

These are all important challenges of writing good historical detective fiction, but some of the finest writers in the field do it superbly. Let’s look at some examples.

The settings of historical detective stories – both in terms of the period as well as the place – are very varied. Steven Saylor’s *Roma Sub Rosa* series are set in ancient Rome. PC Doherty writes novels about an ancient Egyptian sleuth named Amerokte. Incidentally, Doherty is
one of the most prolific and varied writers of historical detective fiction. His other major fictional detective is a medieval English sheriff named Hugh Corbett; but – other than that – Doherty has also written historical detective fiction set in Tudor England and ancient Greece.

Besides Doherty, there are writers of detective stories set just about everywhere – from medieval England and Ireland, to Czarist Russia, to 19th century Istanbul. I’ve even come across an excellent short story that’s set in Australia, in the Dreamtime – some thousands of years before Europeans even arrived in the continent.

The detectives are a delightfully eclectic lot. Brother Cadfael, who was created by Ellis Peters, is a 12th century monk at an abbey in Shrewsbury. Peter Tremayne writes the Sister Fidelma stories – and she is not just a detective, but also a nun, a princess, and a lawyer in 7th century Ireland. Another nun who makes for a very good detective is Boris Akunin’s Sister Pelagia, a Russian Orthodox nun. Jason Goodwin’s 19th century Turkish detective, Yashim the Eunuch, is, of course (as his name suggests), a eunuch – but he’s also an exceptionally good cook.

There are lawyers, sheriffs, lawmen – and women – of different designations. Some, like Steven Saylor’s Gordianus the Finder, are part of the law investigation and administration systems of their era. Others, like Brother Cadfael, just happen to attract crimes and mysteries like iron filings to magnets.

There are also series that use real people as detectives. For example, Gyles Brandreth has an entire collection in which Oscar Wilde is the detective – and he’s supported by a bunch of friends that include Arthur Conan Doyle and Bram Stoker. Jed Rubenfeld’s novel The Interpretation of Murder has Sigmund Freud as the detective.

Probably the most famous of the real-life historical detectives was Judge Dee, the detective in Robert van Gulik’s series.

Judge Dee was an actual living person, a legendary 7th century Chinese magistrate and statesman. Tales of Judge Dee’s famous investigations form an important part of 17th and 18th century Chinese detective novels. Dutch writer, scholar and diplomat Robert van Gulik was fascinated by these medieval Chinese detective novels – and by the character of the perspicacious Judge Dee so much, that he actually decided to write a series of semi-fictional stories featuring Judge Dee. Some of the stories are based upon actual cases that Judge Dee solved. Others are drawn from popular plots of medieval Chinese detective novels. Van Gulik invariably modified these somewhat to make them more suitable for a modern, Western audience.
Judge Dee has also been made the subject of various film and TV adaptations. To start with, there was a TV series, from 1969. Unfortunately, it had Caucasian actors made up to look Chinese, which did detract considerably from the believability of the adaptation. But there was a very well-made 1974 TV movie called *Judge Dee and the Monastery Murders*. In 2010, there was also a Mandarin Chinese movie, called *Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame*, based on the original, real-life Judge Dee. The movie isn’t derived from Robert van Gulik’s books, though, so the feel of the film is very different.

Another important historical detective who’s been made the subject of a TV series is Ellis Peters’s medieval Welsh monk, Brother Cadfael. The Brother Cadfael series starred Derek Jacobi and is really very good – a great way to be introduced to this subgenre.

I read my first historical detective novel – Robert van Gulik’s *The Chinese Maze Murders* – when I was a young teen. I was fascinated by that book, and since then, I’ve read the entire Judge Dee series. I’ve discovered other historical detectives, and devoured their adventures with great relish. I’ve invented one. I love the research, I love learning interesting new facts and sharing them with readers; and I love discovering an era I was not born in. I wish more writers in India would venture into this field – it can be great fun.